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## Defending a Way of Life: An American Community in the Nineteenth Century

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One can only hope that the price of this volume at seventy-five dollars, and the fact that it is something of a bibliography, will not diminish its impact. In fact, it can be hoped that scholarly and professional associations in the United States will consider the book in their annual prize competitions. Certainly this book would be an excellent candidate for one of the book prizes given by the Society of American Archivists or the American Association for State and Local History. Such a prize or commendation would be the most appropriate way to recognize this most singular and special achievement.

*Defending a Way of Life: An American Community in the Nineteenth Century*, by Michael Cassity. SUNY Series in American Labor History. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989. xv, 259 pp. Notes, bibliographical essay, index. \$54.50 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY GREGORY R. ZIEREN, AUSTIN PEAY STATE UNIVERSITY

Social and labor historians, as well as students of nineteenth-century America, may recall Michael Cassity's striking *American Historical Review* article of 1979. In that work he applied the tenets of modernization theory to the development of working-class institutions such as the Ancient Order of United Workmen and the Knights of Labor in Sedalia, Missouri, on the eve of the Great Southwestern Strikes of 1885 and 1886. Cassity's new work, *Defending a Way of Life*, is a far more ambitious attempt to interpret the experience of ordinary people in Sedalia and Pettis County from pioneer days in the 1820s to 1890. At the rhetorical level the attempt is a resounding success, while at the same time it fails to persuade analytically.

Pettis County was settled by migrants from Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina who sought refuge from the encroachment of growing population and market forces in their home states. They found in the relative isolation of central Missouri a place to recreate a simple, subsistence life-style. Cassity depicts the independent lives, the strength of the bonds of community and mutuality, the fundamentals of equality, and the ecological balance of multicrop agriculture in terms worthy of a Rousseau celebrating the noble savage or a Jefferson prizing the yeoman farmer. Only the more romantic and nostalgic passages of Peter Laslett's *The World We Have Lost* will stand comparison to this beautifully crafted paean to frontier life in a preindustrial age before market relations intruded.

Every perfect garden must have its serpent, and in Pettis County his name was George R. Smith, a son-in-law of one of the founders. Lacking biting fangs, this serpent captured his prey—the good, sim-

ple folk of Pettis County—with that evil engine of economic transformation, the railroad. Smith fit the classic portrait of railroad and real estate promoter: Unionist during the Civil War and Radical Republican thereafter, a man apparently out of touch with the main currents of Pettis County life. How he was able to persuade the backward-looking residents of this backwoods region in the 1850s and 1860s to court and vote subsidies for railroad lines, Cassity cannot or will not explain. He considers mainly the failed opposition to levying taxes to finance railroad bonds. Instead, he notes in reference to the arrival of the railroad, "Prometheus was truly unbound," and "Behold the Juggernaut" (46, 68).

Cassity makes no claim that Pettis County was representative of frontier communities in the nineteenth century. On the other hand, he does not admit—if the work of Robert Dykstra on Kansas cattle towns, Malcolm Rohrbough on the land office business, or H. Shelton Stromquist on Iowa railroad towns is accurate—how atypical Pettis County really was. The spirit of boosterism, civic pride, and real estate speculation animated most western communities, prompting fierce competition to secure as many rail links as possible. That the behavior of railroad management later inspired mistrust, even hostility, from townspeople, shippers, passengers, and workers in many of these communities in no way diminishes the open-arms reception at the outset.

Hostility to Jay Gould's lines and community support for the strikers helped ensure the success of the strike of 1885 in Sedalia and Pettis County; when that support failed to materialize in 1886, the strike failed. The central question Cassity addresses is why and how the community responded so differently to such apparently similar situations. Strikers in 1885 responded to local grievances and tapped into the Pettis County tradition of hostility to railroads, acquisitive values, and external control. Circumstances the following year failed to generate community support because the strike was ordered from afar, violence marred its passage, and the railroads transferred the onus of responsibility from management to the Knights of Labor. The chapters on the Great Southwestern Strikes and the community of workers are among the most captivating and best written in the book.

Two final chapters examine life in rural Pettis County and the status of women. Rural protest movements such as the Grangers and the Greenbackers were active in the county and influenced its politics throughout much of the 1870s and 1880s. Unfortunately, Cassity's account stops before the rise of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's party. If the "movement culture" so persuasively described in Lawrence Goodwyn's work was active in the county, such evidence

might have provided the link Cassity needed to demonstrate the continuity of values (localist, antimodern, antimarket) between the antebellum generation and that of the late nineteenth century. As it stands, the link is presumed and not proven.

Much of the chapter on women's experience in Sedalia is devoted to an account of railroad promoter Smith's two daughters. While highly speculative in places, the chapter includes a fascinating account of the sisters' psychological, marital, and gynecological travails as well as their activities in support of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and other reform causes.

Cassity's work is both more and less than the standard community studies that urban, social, and labor historians have turned out over the past twenty years. It is more because his evocation of a bucolic ideal and the values of mutuality and community reads like a belletristic essay; it is less because the demographic, economic, sociological, and political data standard in such works is simply missing. Despite a ten-page bibliographic essay and exhaustive primary research, there is little evidence that the author was trying to address the historiographical issues raised in the usual community studies. Even the notation of secondary sources in the endnotes seems thin and dated. The writing style, too, is both more and less than that expected in such community studies. Flowing and elegiacal in places, penetrating and thought-provoking elsewhere, sometimes the style tends toward the overblown and the pretentious.

The author of this work is to be commended for taking the less well-traveled path in the search for the *mentalités* of his subjects. Whether he reached his destination is considerably less clear or certain.

*Victorian West: Class and Culture in Kansas Cattle Towns*, by C. Robert Haywood. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991. xiv, 325 pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY WILLIAM L. HEWITT, BRIAR CLIFF COLLEGE

For twenty years, television audiences brought Matt, Doc, Miss Kitty, Chester, and Festus of Dodge City into their living rooms. Each episode of the "Gunsmoke" horse opera began with Sheriff Matt Dillon facing down a gunfighter in the dusty streets of Dodge, providing an image of the West and Kansas cattle towns as violent and ruggedly individualistic.

The "Gunsmoke" imagery, however, tells only a small part of the story, as historian C. Robert Haywood illustrates in his comprehensive

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